

Etmaal 2018: Abstract ‘Displaced people for sale?’

Practical information

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Title: Displaced people for sale? A multi-methodological research project on international refugee organizations' public communication strategies towards the Syrian and Central African displacement crises (2011-2018).

Division: ‘Organizational Communication’.

Abstract

Since 2011, the world has faced a major increase in forced displacement (UNHCR, 2017). Moreover, displaced people are nowadays confronted with hostility, xenophobia and an increasing popularity of the far-right. In those contexts, refugee organizations play a vital role to protect the rights and well-being of these people. In recent decades, however, several states have become more reluctant to cooperate with refugee organizations (Loescher, 1996; Betts, Loescher & Milner, 2012) and/or have tightened their asylum policies (Betts & Loescher, 2011; Johnson, 2011). Consequently, public communication – as a tool for informing, sensitization and agenda-setting (Atkin & Rice, 2013) – is crucial for refugee organizations' operations (Dijkzeul & Moke, 2005).

Within this constellation, we will present the objectives and research design of a recently started project on refugee organizations' public communication strategies and this from a multi-method perspective. Despite the significant contribution of said communication to the public perception of displaced people and displacement crises (Chouliaraki, 2012), few studies have examined how refugee organizations attempt to influence the media agenda and broader public opinion in terms of “*what to think*” (“second-level agenda setting”) (Sallot & Johnson, 2006, p. 152, original italics). Therefore, the general objective of this research project is to critically investigate if and how the textual, production and reception dimensions involved in international refugee organizations' public communication strategies towards the recent Syrian and Central African crises relate to and interact with each other. This overarching objective is operationalized through an empirical focus on three key actors (the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, International Rescue Committee and Norwegian Refugee Council) following three interrelated research objectives.

First, we will study the textual dimension of refugee organizations' public communication strategies. Our main objective is to gain insights in the applied strategies regarding the representation of displaced people in public communication. For this purpose, we will conduct a critical discourse analysis (Machin & Mayr, 2012) and quantitative content analysis (Riff, Lacy & Fico, 2014) on the selected organizations'

press releases, news articles, videos and photos of 2011 till 2018. Considering the magnitude of the dataset and the time-consuming nature of our discursive research, we will take a sample that consists of the data of the years 2011, 2014, 2016 and 2018.

Second, we will focus on the production dimension. Central are the political, economic and socio-cultural forces and motivations behind the public communication strategies. How does this context help us to explain their communication practices? To reconstruct and analyze these practices, we will conduct 18 in-depth expert interviews with the selected refugee organizations' heads of communication and press and regional officers responsible for the communication around the Syrian and Central African crises.

Finally, we will examine how various intended publics actually perceive refugee organizations' public communication strategies. For reasons of pragmatics and feasibility, we look at the reception by a sample of citizens, displaced people and journalists living in Flanders. How do these publics interpret the various strategies and how is this related to political, economic and socio-cultural contexts and motivations? For this analysis, eight focus group interviews consisting of 7 Flemish citizens (N=56) will be organized. Just as in the other reception analyses, the respondents will be selected with attention to diversity in terms of gender, age (18+) and socio-economic background, and the interviews will focus on the participants' reception of the presented public communication and on their general attitude.

Further, we will conduct in-depth interviews, given the research subject's sensitivity, with displaced people. We will interview ten recognized Syrian refugees and ten recognized Central African refugees, both living in Flanders (N=20). These actors' (mostly largely ignored) opinions about this subject seem highly relevant, regarding their unique involvement in the crises.

Considering the importance of media attention, we also focus on journalists' opinions about refugee organizations' public communication. How do they perceive the displayed communication and which role does it play in the news production process? We plan expert interviews with 21 journalists who regularly report about the Syrian and/or Central African crisis. This includes audiovisual news media (public broadcaster VRT and commercial broadcaster VTM), printed news media (quality newspapers

De Morgen and De Standaard and popular newspapers Het Laatste Nieuws and Het Nieuwsblad) and one alternative news medium (MO* magazine).

Apart from its topical nature and relevance for a better understanding of the political, economic and cultural dimensions involved in international refugee organizations' public communication strategies, this project will provide a significant and original empirical contribution to key debates in non-profit studies and the research field of international communication.